

UU Inclusivity in Minnesota's School Meals Program

Dear Minnesota Lawmakers,

On Friday, March 17, 2023, Governor Walz signed the Free School Meals bill into law—a significant milestone for the youth of our state. However, Minnesota's "universal meals" program falls short of being truly universal.

As a member of the Unitarian Universalist Association community, we can attest to the importance of accommodating dietary restrictions rooted in religious or moral convictions. Many communities, including Jains, Jews, and Muslims, adhere to dietary practices that limit or exclude animal products, and these needs are not fully addressed by the current program.

As Unitarian Universalists we practice [ethical eating](#)¹, meaning our dietary choices consider the impact on the planet and living creatures, often leading to prioritizing plant-based options. Advocating for a plant-based school meal option strongly ties into many aspects of [UU values](#)² including, but not limited to, **Justice:** *We covenant to dismantle racism and all forms of systemic oppression*, **Equity:** *We covenant to use our time, wisdom, attention, and money to build and sustain fully accessible and inclusive communities*, and **Interdependence:** *We covenant to protect Earth and all beings from exploitation*.

We urge you to sponsor a bill similar to [Illinois' initiative](#)³ that allows students to request plant-based meal options. Minnesota's legislation could go a step further, [incorporating language](#)⁴ due to lessons learned from Illinois to ensure more effective implementation.

This change would not only make school meals inclusive for students with religious dietary needs but also address the needs of the many students who are lactose intolerant. Lactose intolerance disproportionately affects Black, Asian, Native American, Latinx, and Ashkenazi Jewish communities, with [rates](#)⁵ ranging from 70–95%. Current [federal regulations](#)⁶ do not require schools participating in the National School Lunch Program to accommodate dietary requests based on religion, morals, or personal preferences unless classified as a disability. This oversight marginalizes diverse student populations and, in many cases, forces students to consume products that harm their health.

With plant-based by prior request Minnesota could lead the nation ensuring equitable access to school meals for all students, fostering inclusivity, and promoting health.

Members of my community who live in your district would like to meet with you to discuss this further and provide additional details to support this initiative. We'd also like to include Jodi Gruhn, jodi.gruhn@exploreveg.org of [Wholesome Minnesota](#)⁷.

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Unitarian Universalist Church of Minnetonka (UUCM) Climate Justice Team

Lake Fellowship of Unitarian Universalists

Merging Waters Unitarian Universalist Congregation (formerly known as Michael Servetus Unitarian Society)

Dakota Unitarian Universalist Church

Reference:

1. <https://www.uua.org/environment/eating>
2. <https://www.uua.org/uuagovernance/committees/article-ii-study-commission/final-proposed-revision-article-ii>
3. <https://www.ilga.gov/legislation/BillStatus.asp?DocNum=4089&GAID=16&DocTypeID=HB&SessionID=110&GA=102>
4. https://docs.google.com/document/d/1oyT2XS4212UaeA9s_5kX_n9z7tyV1rDj-w_nTcHXXnM/edit?usp=sharing
5. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC1906652/#:~:text=Lactose%20intolerance%20occurs%20in%20about,in%20Asia%20and%20American%20Indians.>
6. <https://education.mn.gov/MDE/dse/FNS/prog/After/ops/>
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